

The
ABCs
of
Religion

**THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT
OF RELIGIOUS THOUGHT
AND PRACTICES**

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Dedicated to

MARGUERITE GODWIN STEVENS

Lifelong soulmate and encourager

Exemplary mother of

Kathie, Timothy and Sheralyn

Author's Introduction

To help readers be prepared to meet ideas they will find in this book, let me introduce myself. I am an anomaly, which means I cannot be easily classified because I do not fit within any common rule. I am a free-thinker who tries to consider carefully what other people think and say, examine issues as thoroughly as I am able, then come to a conclusion about what I believe.

I am a deeply convinced theist. I have not found any concept about human life and the origin of the material universe that has any foundation in rational thought or scientific search that is adequate and believable to me except a profound faith that a Supreme Spiritual Being is the infinite source of all that exists and of the moral values inherent in human life.

But, about many things, I am an agnostic, which means that infinity is so great that mystery about eternal things makes some things unknowable to us during the human pilgrimage of our physical lives. What “eternity beyond this life” will be like, we cannot comprehend. Let me quote an honored teacher of mine who said to his young son, “We do not know what heaven will be like, but Jesus will be there, and that will be heaven, won't it?”

Above all, I am a devoted Christian, a Jesus theologian, and a free-churchman. I believe there is truth in every religion and that there has been misinterpretation and misuse of every religion by some of its practitioners. However, I believe the supreme revelation of God's self, his nature, his character, and his will and ways for mankind were lived out and exemplified in human incarnation by Jesus of Nazareth. I trust him as my Lord.

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Prologue

Religion is a human thing. It has to do with the supernatural, but in itself religion is a human experience. Religion is a personal response of trust in whatever is believed by a person to be of supreme value. Religious institutions such as churches, temples, synagogues, mosques and covens are pervasive throughout the world, but these institutions are not the essence of religion. They are organized channels for religious experience and expression. The fundamental nature of religion is a personal experience of a sense of supernatural value and authority, a belief in some force or being outside oneself that influences one's life and destiny.

A sense of the supernatural gives rise to an inner motivation to express that sense of something supernatural in outward ways, such as by some form of worship. Belief in some fate-controlling influence leads to attempts to appease or mollify that force or being. Religion, however, is always rooted in an individual person's experience or belief.

It is quite common for people to embrace a particular expression of religion through a presentation about that religion by another person. This is what happens when a person accepts a particular faith as a result of example and teaching by parents, through the teaching and preaching of a church or other religious organization, or in response to some other form of communication about religious beliefs. It is less common for people to seriously examine the foundations of their religious faith and the meaning of their religious practices.

Writings that are believed to be sacred play an important part in the way people understand religion. Through generations and centuries, records of the things believed in by the varied religions of humankind have been written and preserved. As these writings came to be considered sacred, they came to have great influence in the lives of people who believed and practiced each particular religion. Therefore, it is important to consider how the sacred books of the varied historic religions came into being and how they came to be considered sacred.

The purpose of this work is to encourage its readers to make a sincere effort to understand their personal faith. Such an effort is aided by a basic understanding of the historical origins and development of religious thought and expression. Sincere effort has been made to keep the language of this work non-technical. When theological or philosophical terms are used, they are explained as simply as possible. I hope that this work will be helpful to readers who are not familiar with the historical

development of the religion in which they have placed personal faith. An elementary discussion of several historic religious faiths is included to help individuals compare their personal faith with the faiths and practices of others.

Since the origins of religious thought, faith and practice reach back to prehistoric and prescientific times, we must consider the influences of limited knowledge and superstition. And we will, of course, have to try to understand as many varieties of religious belief and practice as possible.

This writing is intended for Christian laypersons; therefore, it seems appropriate to affirm that I am a devout Christian and a practicing churchman whose deep conviction is that, in Jesus of Nazareth, the truest revelation of the nature of God, the character of God, and the meaning of religion has reached its highest expression.

Some Words about Words and Origins

Among Christians, the word god is universally used as if it were a proper name. This is technically incorrect, for the word god is a generic term referring to a supernatural and/or supreme being.¹ The English word *God* has essentially the same meaning as the Hebrew word *El* (plural *Elohim*) and the Arabic word *Allah*. These words all refer to a supreme being, but they do not in themselves describe the nature or character of that supreme being. The nature and character of *El* in Hebrew religion are reflected in the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament of the Christian Bible) by the personal name *Yahweh* (*Jehovah*), after the experience of Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 3:13-15). The personal nature and character of *God* in the Christian religion is identified as *The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*. There is no such personal name for the Supreme Being in Islam; Muslims simply use the generic term *Allah*.²

In the historical development of religious thought and expression, there has been a general movement from belief in many divine beings (polytheism) toward belief in one supreme divine being (monotheism). There is a theory that among primitive peoples there was a common belief in a distant High God who was the creator of the world and the parent of lesser deities who were believed to influence the daily lives of the people. This belief is similar to the Great Spirit (Great White Father) believed in by some Native American tribes. Those who find evidence of this original monotheism believe that it was corrupted into the animism and polytheism that were the predominant forms of primitive religion. True monotheism developed later.

Three great monotheistic religions are widely practiced in modern times: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. These religions, however, were relatively late in developing. Judaism is the oldest of the three, beginning with Abraham about 2100-2000 BC. Christianity had its beginning through the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. Islam began through the writings and influence of Muhammed (AD 570-632).

There were great primitive religious systems that developed long before these three monotheistic religions. The following systems of worship developed earlier than Judaism:

- Sumerian sun, moon, air and water gods in Mesopotamia;
- Animal-headed gods in Egypt;
- Primitive religions in China centered on harmony between heaven, earth and humanity;
- Primitive religions in India embodying the doctrines of karma and transmigration;
- Tribal fertility religions in pre-Hebrew Canaan.

The following systems of religion developed in the eastern world after the beginning of Judaism but before the beginning of Christianity:

- Zoroastrianism in Persia, probably before 1000 BC;
- Shinto in Japan, about 600 BC;
- Buddhism in northern India, about 500 BC;
- Confucianism in China, about 500 BC.

Islam developed in Arabia and spread across North Africa some 600 years after the beginning of Christianity. The Greek and Roman pantheons (groups of deities that focused on natural forces and human emotions) developed as the Graeco-Roman cultures and empires rose and fell. As Christianity spread west through Europe and North America, it met and interacted with already existing forms of primitive and nature-oriented religions.

All of these religious systems were and are believed to be authentic and supremely valuable by those who have believed in them and practiced various expressions of them.

The Basis of Religious Beliefs

Systems of religion have arisen in two primary ways and can be described as *discovery religions* or *revealed religions*. *Discovery religions* are systems of religious practice developed by people who observe influences in nature that affect their lives, come to believe that those features or forces have supernatural powers, and fashion worship practices to seek to please them or to pacify their displeasure. *Revealed religions*, on the other hand, are systems of religious practice that are formed by people who are convinced that a supernatural person/power has made known to them, by a revelation, how they should live and give homage to the person/power doing the revealing. The difference is whether a system of religion has its origin from an *upward* human search or a *downward* supernatural revelation. The three great monotheistic

religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) all affirm their origins as a revelation by a great, Supreme God. These are discussed in detail later. The other religious systems developed as *discovery religions* based on observation of controlling influences in nature or in human life.

All of these religious systems are human creations. They differ in origin on the basis of human conviction about what has supernatural influence, what is worthy of worship, and what calls for the commitment of a person's life. Religion is about the supernatural, but religious convictions, practices and systems are human responses to human beliefs about the supernatural.

In examining religious beliefs and practices, the three most important factors to try to understand are the nature of the supernatural person/power being worshipped, the character of that person/power, and the relationship of human persons to that supernatural person/power.

With these basic propositions set forth, we will now examine the origin and development of various religious systems to demonstrate how these ideas play out.

¹Merriam-Webster, *Collegiate Dictionary*, 10th ed., (Springfield, Massachusetts, 1999), 500.

²Edward Jurji, "Allah," *Collier's Encyclopedia*, 1 (1987): 570.